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Appreciative Inquiry



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The organization's web addresses are www.hrvoice.org, and www.bchrma.org

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based philosophy being used by corporate leaders, change agents, community developers, strategic planners, human resources specialists, organizational development consultants, and other professionals seeking an alternative to deficit-based problem solving approaches.

The focus of Appreciative Inquiry is on what goes well in organizations and teams to determine the forces that "give life" to them. According to two of the foremost thinkers in the field, David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, "Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations and the world around them."

On February 15th and 16th, practitioners in the Pacific Northwest will have a rare opportunity to see some of the field's most well-known leaders at a two-day conference, *Appreciative Inquiry: Creating Dynamic Destinies*. The conference will take place at the Four Seasons Hotel in Vancouver, B.C.

Recently, I had the opportunity to get together with Robyn McCulloch and Arden Henley, two of the speakers who will be presenting at the conference, and seek their insights into subjects of interest to HR practitioners.

Bill Scott (WS): Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths based approach to working with people. Tell me about some of the ways it can be used by HR professionals.

Arden Henley (AH): AI can be used in a general way to alter or modify the culture of an organization. One of the most famous examples of this very general application is *Imagine Chicago* through which vast neighbourhoods in Chicago were transformed using an AI approach. It can be employed by HR professionals to support and enhance 'communities of practice' within organizations.

AI establishes a different more optimistic and energized tone. Similarly it can be used in the development of marketing, branding and brand promises kinds of initiatives. AI can be campaign based. It can form the basis of a sales effort or the launch of a new program. I have found AI skills invaluable in performance evaluation, where once again a focus on the "best of what is" builds trust and forms a foundation for the exploration of more delicate issues related to needed improvements.

Robyn McCulloch (RM): The concerns HR professionals have come to me with are typically about building relationships with others, unleashing leadership capacity, developing a powerful presence, creating professional fulfillment, and optimizing the personal strengths of employees. Appreciative approaches are very effective means of addressing these concerns; they assist organizations in developing a greater capacity for employee recognition and rewards as well as learning specific skills and competencies to enhance leadership.

AI allows organizations to tap into what is most important in their working relationships; work is managed effectively because the people involved care for one another.

WS: Appreciative Inquiry is often portrayed as an approach to working with organizations and large-scale change initiatives. How can it be used to work with individuals, teams, departments, and other smaller groups? How is the approach the same as and different from working with organizational change?

AH: AI is a practice of change whether individually or organizationally focused. In fact, AI assumes that changes are taking place; it is a question of in what direction and how the changes will be guided. What is different about AI is the basis of change is not a critical analysis of what is deficient or even in need of improvement, rather it is what is working now and how that can be further extended or refined. It is as much a philosophy as it is practice and in this way it is widely adaptable to a range of contexts.

RM: Appreciative approaches can lead to dramatic shifts in the results that people see in their organizations. For example, I worked with a company where a particular group was constantly missing deadlines. They blamed one another, but never managed to “solve” the problem. I introduced them to an appreciative process – one that allowed them to more effectively communicate their needs. In a relatively short period of time, they were able to more effectively set deadlines – ones they could meet.

WS: Most progressive organizations and their leaders understand that a strong, positive organizational culture is critical to the organization’s success. We also know that a deeply engrained organizational culture can take years to shift. How can AI be used to positively impact the relationships that exist within organizations and thus, shift the culture?

RM: AI is an effective way to create high performance teams. The appreciative process assists people in the organization to find out more about what they have in common, how to communicate with greater sincerity, and understand what they value and respect about one another.

I began working with a start-up company 2½ years after they began their business. When I met them, the executive team was only communicating via email. Using an appreciative approach, they came to understand what was important about their communication with one another and they moved

AH: What creates and sustains culture. From an AI perspective culture is created and re-created by the ways in which people talk and interact with one another on a day to day basis. AI is such a powerful agent for change because it infuses cultures with a different way of talking and interacting. Try it at a meeting. Ask a question based on appreciation and see what happens in the

WS: Many organizations are utilizing coaching to assist their people in achieving peak performance. Coaches typically seek to assist their clients in getting clear about their development needs and then create a plan that addresses those needs. What is an AI approach to coaching and how is it similar to and different from other approaches?

RM: An appreciative approach is a way of being with the client. The coach uses her own personal experiences to assist the client in focusing on strengths, positives and the limitless opportunities that abound for the creation of change in the client which, in turn, has a ripple effect throughout the team, department, and organization.

Appreciative coaching uses many of the same techniques as other types of coaching – we just do it from the place of unconditional, positive regard. There are six key conversations that need to occur over the course of a coaching experience: the development of mutual trust, the enhancement of clarity and purpose, leveraging the client's strengths and opportunities, creating a plan and commitment to it, generating learning and transformation, and, finally, celebrating closure and moving on.

This process is usually sequential and depending on the client, it might take three months, six months, or a year to complete.

WS: Many organizations are faced with turnover. The economy is booming and the need for skilled workers is higher than ever before. Workers have more opportunities than at any other time in recent memory. We are pretty good at identifying why people choose to leave organizations. How can we use AI to develop environments that entice them to stay?

AH: We can ask them what would be most likely to result in their staying or alternatively, what resulted in their staying elsewhere. Positive cultures adhere, negative cultures repulse.

WS: Ultimately organizations exist to serve their clients and customers. How does an AI approach to working with employees positively impact these most important external stakeholders?

AH: Increasingly AI initiatives have incorporated external stakeholders. “What has been your most satisfying experience of us as a customer over the past six months?” In the simplest of terms improvements in internal culture frequently ripple to external stakeholders (and the families and friends of employees).

RM: Ultimately, engaged and enthusiastic employees go beyond what is needed and begin to anticipate what their clients and customers need.

WS: HR is about more than just the “people skills.” How is Appreciative Inquiry used to address issues such as compensation and benefits?

AH: No matter how “hard” the question or area we can benefit from finding out what is working. “What do you appreciate the most about your current benefit

package?” The most important point here and, in some other areas, is that AI is not daffy, new age positive talk, it is a widely applicable and rigorous philosophy and methodology that climbs on issues from the other side. AI always wants to know what is working, what people feel good about and from where they are now, rather than a hypothetical point of reference, what they see moving forward. It is not panacea, nor is it always the thing to do.

WS: Many organizations live in strictly regulated environments. For example, unionized companies must live within the bounds of a legally binding collective agreement. How can AI assist us in addressing often contentious labour relations issues?

RM: I think AI can be used when you are working with people to help them to initiate a conversation about a potentially controversial subject. People who take an appreciative approach are more likely to be confident in their ability to effectively manage conflict and create a win-win scenario.

AH: With respect to collective agreements, I'd ask people, “What is the best of the current agreement? What is it about it that makes it the best? How did we get there (in our previous negotiations)?”

Robyn McCulloch leads The Confluence (www.theconfluence.com) as a visionary business consultant and leadership coach. She specializes in coaching through embodied leadership practices to create sustainable, meaningful change for individuals, teams, and organizations.

Arden Henley is the Executive Director of Canadian Programs at City University. He is also co-director of Kean & Henley Consultation (www.marykeancounsellor.com). Well known for his innovative leadership style and thought provoking presentations, he has consulted broadly with community and government agencies.

Bill Scott is the principal of WJS Consulting (wjs.consulting@shaw.ca). He is known for his passion and commitment to working with clients to find to find their own answers, his ability to keep the focus on the possible rather than the problems, and his ability to blend theory with practice.